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Lawyer eager to tackle 'corruption culture' in state government via panel he'll lead

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Special to the Law Bulletin

Patrick M. Collins has spent part of his legal career rooting out corruption. Now he's being asked to help prevent the growth of weeds in the first place.

With Illinois reeling from allegations of corruption involving former governor Rod R. Blagojevich, many voices are calling for legal and political reform in the state.

One of those voices is that of now-Gov. Patrick J. Quinn, who as lieutenant governor formed the 14-member Illinois Reform Commission prior to the impeachment of Blagojevich to help sort out the state's "culture of corruption," as Quinn put it.

Enter former federal prosecutor Collins, chair of the commission and partner in the law firm of Perkins, Coie LLP.

When he announced Collins' appointment on Jan. 16, Quinn said Collins "is a strong voice for fairness and accountability in government. He will stand up for the people of Illinois."

Collins said Quinn personally called him after Blagojevich's Dec. 9, 2008, arrest by federal agents. Quinn told Collins he had watched Collins' career and wanted Collins to chair the commission to propose reforms for state government.

"I saw it as an opportunity for public service," Collins said. "I am a big believer in public service, and I do have a very active law firm supporting me."

"I did have two questions for him," Collins added, saying he took the job on the conditions that he would have a role in selecting panel members and that the commission's reports would be available to the public without being "picked over and sanitized."

"He made it clear that there are no sacred cows," Collins said of Quinn. "Whatever we saw, we saw."

Collins said he knew from his time as a prosecutor that "it's so important

to have independence, and I really thought it was important to build in that independence" for the reform commission.

Collins is no stranger to political corruption. Serving as an assistant U.S. attorney for 12 years, four of which were in the public corruption section, Collins has dealt with scandals at all levels of government. He investigated ghost payroll cases in Chicago and won

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"One of the things that I think at the end of the day is you can't legislate morality, you can't legislate ethics. Part of it is how do we set out expectations and standards?" Collins said.

That is a matter about which he truly cares, which explains why he agreed to take on the project pro bono, Collins said.

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a conviction against former governor George H. Ryan in the licenses-for-bribes scandal.

Under Collins' direction, the commission will study the factors related to corruption and the solutions proposed elsewhere, creating reports and drafting legislation to address the problem. Collins said the commission likely will release its final report in late April, at the end of the 100-day timeline set for the commission.

"I thought it was important to have a sense of urgency to it," Collins said.

The diverse panel includes prosecutors and attorneys, as well as community leaders and members of the clergy. Among its members are Cook County State's Attorney Anita M. Alvarez and former federal prosecutor Lawrence Oliver II, now the chief of investigations at Boeing Corp.

The commission's work will focus on transparency in government, campaign finance reform, procurement and attitudes about corruption.

"I think it starts with the fundamental principle that acts of corruption are generally conducted in the dark and under cover," Collins said.

"One of the things I drew from my experience as a federal prosecutor is that corruption has tangible consequences," Collins said. "Corruption is not cost-free.... It cuts across a lot of spectrums, and it is an issue that I've certainly seen the underbelly of."

Balancing public service with his private practice is a matter of time management, Collins said.

"My vision on the reform commission is that they're a client, and it's an important client just like any other client I have," Collins said. "I throw myself into my work — it just means I'm stretching the day longer."

Collins said the balancing act is made easier by the support of his peers.

"It's important to note that in virtually everything I do, I have a lot of great help," Collins said. "The day I got appointed, I had 30 lawyers either come to my office or send me an e-mail saying, 'Is there any way I can help?'"

"There's this sort of mentality that here is an opportunity to do something good and something tangible," Collins said.